

Japanese mad over Madusa

For an American from Robbinsdale, Minn., Japan is a friendly place. Even when the American is getting slammed to the canvas.

Madusa, the first American to become a full-time member of the All Japan Women's Wrestling Association troupe, is learning the ropes.

Japanese women's wrestling is unlike anything in the United States. The promotion plays nightly to an audience of primarily teen-age girls. The top



**GRUNT
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BY DAVE MELTZER
FOR THE NATIONAL

stars, like Madusa, are pop idols. Through her exposure as a wrestler, Madusa has a photo book, a promotional video, a record and a bikini poster, and has received offers for movie roles.

Women's wrestling peaked in the mid-1980s. Paced by the popularity of

Chigusa Nagayo, whom many consider the greatest woman wrestler of all time, TV ratings for the biggest matches would approach those of National Football League games in the United States. Nagayo, who combined the wrestling ability of a Ricky Steamboat with the charisma of a Hulk Hogan, spawned a generation of Japanese teen-age girls with bowl haircuts. But when she retired last May, it was referred to by some as "the day the music died." The shows still draw between 1,000 and 2,500 screaming teen-agers at every road stop with tickets priced from \$27 to \$40. Madusa gets gifts from fans at every stop on tour, everything from flowers, fan letters written in broken English, homemade jigsaw puzzles of herself and key chains to more expensive gifts.

"The fans are so cute," she said. "A lot of them are very shy. Sometimes, they'll just hand me a letter and almost run away. Last week someone gave me a Pomeranian dog [which costs about \$850]. It was so expensive I didn't want to take it but I knew it would hurt their feelings if I didn't."

Madusa's promotion features the fastest-paced wrestling action in the world. Acrobatic and flying maneuvers along with skillful wrestling moves with which Japanese stars like The Great Muta and The Jumping Bomb Angels dazzled American audiences in recent years are commonplace on the women's shows.

To reach that level of proficiency, AJWWA wrestlers live a spartan lifestyle. Daily training consists of three to five hours of near torturous conditioning workouts along with



Idol: The blond American star Madusa is a big hit in Japan, where fans give her gifts, ranging from handmade puzzles to Pomeranian dogs, and send her letters.

practice of the most intricate pro wrestling maneuvers.

Madusa was a bodybuilder in the United States, but there is very little weight work in her Japanese training.

"Endurance is the priority," she said. "There's lots of running, jumping rope and jumping squats. The biggest difference between Japanese and American wrestling is speed. They're all fast. If you can't keep up, you screw up a lot. American wrestling is like Shakespeare, and I'm not putting it down by saying that. But this is all sport."

There are strict lifestyle rules as well, known as The Three No's: No drinking. No smoking. No boyfriends.

The 27-member troupe of wrestlers does about 20 shows per month. On her occasional days off, or days when the promotion has matches near Tokyo, Madusa, who admits to being something of a loner, fills her free time with Japanese language classes, some modeling and voice lessons.

Becoming a female wrestler in Japan means surviving incredible odds. Several thousand girls contact the office annually. Based on resumes, about 400, between the ages of 15 and 19, are picked for annual tryouts. Eight will be picked from that group, and of those,

about half will quit in the first year. It generally takes six months of boot camp-like training before their first match. After about two years the promotion will start to push the survivors as "new stars." They'll either be kendo stick-wielding, face-painted villains with spiked hair died blue, green or blond—female Road Warrior types—with names like Aja Kong, Bull Nakano or the legendary Dump Matsumoto, or part of cutesy tag teams like The Honey Wings, Jumping Bomb Angels or The Sweethearts.

But the career span is short. The girls pushed as stars get phased down after two or three years to make way for the next generation. They face a mandatory retirement at 26.

But when they hang in there, the dedication is complete. The best wrestler in the group, Akira Hokuto, suffered a broken neck a few years back when she was given a pile driver off the top rope. Even after the broken neck, she continued to wrestle for nearly 15 minutes. It was originally thought she'd never wrestle again, but a year later she was back. Another girl, Toshiyo Yamada, had a serious spinal operation in April after one side of her body was paralyzed from a bad fall. Although she's been warned that an-

other bad fall could put her in a wheelchair for life, she's already training for her comeback.

A typical woman's wrestling card consists of six or seven matches, with one of the top stars, often Madusa, performing a short concert midway through the card.

At 5-foot-9½, Madusa is the tallest woman in the promotion. Although some of the villains look monstrous when viewed from the crowd, none is taller than 5-7. Some of the good guys are downright tiny. At 26, she's also the oldest, since they waived the age rule in her case.

Many American women wrestlers have toured Japan for a few weeks at a time. But last August, when Madusa signed a one-year contract with AJWWA, she became the first American to live and train like a Japanese wrestler.

Born Debbie Miceli, although even her father calls her Madusa now, she was introduced to pro wrestling while training as a bodybuilder in a gym run by Jesse Ventura.

As with many weight lifting types in the Twin Cities, she met wrestling trainer Eddie Sharkey.

After working the small-time circuits for a few months, sometimes living out of her car and making \$15 payoffs for matches, Madusa, then known as Madusa Miceli, got her first break in the Minneapolis-based AWA early in 1987. She became the group's champion a few months later when Sherri Martel left to become the World Wrestling Federation's Queen Sensational Sherri.

In late 1988, Nagayo had a rare U.S. match, against Madusa in Las Vegas. This led to Madusa's first Japan tour in January of 1989. Madusa admits to being out of her league in the ring with the Japanese wrestlers at the time. But she got a lot of magazine exposure because of the Japanese fascination with blond-haired, blue-eyed American beauties. After a second tour in May, she was offered a deal that made her the highest paid wrestler in the promotion.

In her first two tours, Madusa came across more as a bratty American villain. She was turned into a good-guy when she became a full-timer, and her image has slowly changed from a blond bombshell to an All-American jock type.

In January, she was voted by her peers The Most Inspirational Wrestler for her dedication in improving her ring ability. To Madusa, that award meant more than any other honor she's received since entering pro wrestling. And those honors have included two versions of the world title and a rookie of the year award from Pro Wrestling Illustrated.

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6/19/90